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MAILING ADDRESS: P. O. BOX 15072
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94115

June 6, 1973

STATEMENT TO THE MAYOR'S COMMITTEE
ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

We were pleased to note that the Mayor's Office had established a Commission on the Status of Women and we appreciate the opportunity to tell you that in San Francisco, Black Women Organized for Action exists, with the spirit of San Francisco's own Mary Ellen (Mammy) Pleasant. We are concerned that minority women -- Black women -- have greater representation both on the Commission and in its concerns.

- We are Black, and therefore imbedded in our consciousness is commitment to the struggle of Black people for identity and involvement in decisions that affect our lives and the lives of other generations of Black people who will follow us.
- We are Women, and therefore aware of the sometimes blatant waste of the talents and energies of Black women because of the place this society has decreed for us.
- We are Organized, because we recognize that only together, only by pooling our talents and resources, can we make major change in the institutions which have limited our opportunities and stifled our growth as human beings.
- We are for Action, because we believe the skills of Black women can be used best if we are full rather than limited participants in this society.

We think it appropriate that the Commission communicate directly with its special constituency -- women -- in order to avoid a duplication of last February's fiasco at the Mayor's

Forum on Women where various segments of that special constituency were ignored. We -- Black women -- are one of those special groups that have not had full participatory opportunity either before the Mayor's Committee on the Status of Women or within this society. We are here today to give you a perspective that is unlike that of the larger society. We are here to alert you to both our "specialness" and our "commonness" vis-a-vis other women.

We are special in that we have for too long been excluded from the decision-making process -- even when the focus of the decision was on women, and even in those rare instances when the processes were directed by women -- white women. As Black women, we are determined that we shall no longer be invisible. Traditionally, we have been viewed as special in those areas where we have most in common with other women. A myth has been perpetuated about the matriarchy of Black women and its castration effect on Black men. But rather than being matriarchs and therefore special, we are more like our sisters who were -- have been -- are -- referred to as courageous and valiant helpmates when they struggled mightily to keep their families together in westward bound covered wagons. Obviously Black women also were involved in Westward expansion; between 1870 and 1910, while the total Black population more than doubled, the Black population in the Pacific states of Washington, Oregon and California increased five times. (To put this in some perspective, we note that a Spanish census of 1790 identified 18% of California's population as of African descent.)

Although our history is replete with examples of the courage of Black women, it is equally replete with omissions of those examples. Will

your inquiry into the Status of Women be made from the perspective that includes the knowledge:

- That a Black woman named Mary Fields, hauled freight in Montana in 1884, carried the U.S. mail in 1885, ran a laundry at the age of 70, and then operated as a one woman collection agency when she left a saloon to fell with one blow a customer who failed to pay his laundry bill.
- That a Black woman named Edmonia Lewis, contributed mightily to the culture of the West and indeed the entire country as the first Black woman sculptress.
- That a Black woman named Clara Brown at age 59 found herself in a westward caravan of 30 covered wagons and seven years later had accumulated through her efforts \$10,000 -- despite the fact that she never refused help to anyone in need; that Clara Brown purchased her own wagon to relocate her relatives in the west and sponsored many other Black wagon trains.
- That a Black woman named Biddy Mason trudged behind 300 wagons of her master's caravan keeping cattle together during the trip from Mississippi to California; that Biddy Mason refused to return to Mississippi; that through hard work and clever investments Biddy amassed a fortune in land which she donated for use as schools, nursing homes and churches.
- That in the early 1900's one hundred Black women formed a vigilante committee to protect their sister, Mary Johnson, after white neighbors in a section of Los Angeles, invaded the Johnson's home and threw their belongings onto the lawn.
- That a Black woman (mulatto) was listed in the 1790 census as the grandmother of former California governor Pio Pico.

From a contemporary text entitled "The Black West", I quote: "Some black westerners had arrived during the war, escaping a life of bondage. Howard C. Bruce and his fiancée, both armed, fled slavery in Missouri to reach Fort Leavenworth. There, on March 31, 1864, the couple put aside their weapons and were married . . ." Please note the Author identifies the man, "Howard Bruce", and the woman, "his fiancée".

This quotation is another example of our "commonness". Today, enlightened historians are attempting to tell the story of Blacks in this country; but, in recounting this shared experience, the author finds it necessary to document only the name of the man involved. The woman is nameless. So Black women have a "commonness" with other women whose racial histories were told earlier with a decidedly male slant.

Those small examples of historical contributions lead into Black women's present status in present society. We can address, for example, the status of Black women in San Francisco city employment.

We note in the Racial and Ethnic Employment Pattern Survey of City and County of San Francisco Employees (conducted by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission) that out of a total workforce of 20,087, Black workers constitute 21.7% or 4,355; women constitute 27.4% or 5,522 of the total workforce. Unfortunately, the survey did not break down the statistics on women by race. Of all the officials and professional employed by the city 45.2% are women. We are sure, however, that the majority of these women are found in the Health and Social Services -- the categories that women have been traditionally restricted to.

It is difficult to analyze the participation of Black women in City government employment because the data are not organized to show the male/female percentages within each racial or ethnic group for each job category. However, one indicator leads us to guess that Black women are not found in any significant numbers in upper levels of City employment. There are 1,026 employees earning monthly salaries of \$1,501 or more. Seventy-seven of these are women -- only three of the

77 are Black women; three are of Spanish origin, seven are Asians, none other non-white. Similarly, a survey of the 50 highest paid female city employees shows only one Black woman in that group -- and she is a member of the Mayor's Committee on the Status of Women.

We urge that the Affirmative Action Program administered by the Civil Service Commission be implemented and that a full-time, paid equal employment officer be assigned by that Commission to do the job - now.

What we truly are as women or as Black women or human beings or groups is an unknown quantity insofar as we have not determined our own destiny. We have an obligation as black women to project ourselves into the revolution to destroy these institutions which not only oppress Blacks but women as well, for if those institutions continue to flourish, they will be used against us in the continuing battle of mind over body.

We hope your inquiry into the status of women and your conclusions will apply the perspective of our special concerns as Black Women as well as the perspective of common concerns that we share with other women. Black Women Organized for Action is ready to help -- we can refer highly qualified black women as speakers on many subjects, as candidates for a wide variety of jobs and as prospective members on city boards and commissions. You now have the opportunity to demonstrate good faith responsiveness to our needs. We are determined that, as Black Women, we shall no longer be invisible.

Thank You

Prepared by BLACK WOMEN ORGANIZED FOR ACTION for presentation at the June 6, 1973 hearing of the San Francisco Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women.